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Published online: 21 Feb 2017.

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From theft to racist brawl: the framing of Low Yat incident by Malaysian newspapers

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ABSTRACT
This study aimed to conduct a framing analysis on the coverage of the Law Yat incident, whereby a theft case was escalated into racist brawl in Malaysia. The study compared the coverage of mainstream Malay-, English- and Chinese-language as well as alternative newspapers. The findings indicated that the newspapers reported the incident with different intensity, prominence, news sources, news frames and valence. It was found that the Law Yat incident has been highly racialized by irresponsible bloggers, social media users and politicians in the country. The findings also reflected that race and ethnicity issues remain highly politicized in Malaysia.

Introduction

On 11 July 2015, a melee erupted between a group of youths and smartphone traders in Low Yat Plaza, which is a popular tech shopping mall in Jalan Bukit Bintang, Kuala Lumpur. A 22-year-old unemployed man, Shahrul Anuar Abdul Aziz, went to Low Yat Plaza with his friend. Subsequently, he was caught for stealing a Lenovo smartphone. Shahrul and his friend were handed over to the police but his friend was released later, even after tested positive for drugs. Upon his release, Shahrul's friend instigated seven people to return to the scene for retribution. They attacked several shop attendants and damaged some electronics during the scuffle. The lost was estimated to be up to RM70,000 (Cheng, 2015).

Videos and images taken by onlookers at the scene went viral on social media almost immediately after the brawl. Initially, social media spread that the melee was sparked by the sale of a fake smartphone to the suspect, who then confronted the shop owner. Police investigation later revealed that the theft of a smartphone had indeed occurred.

On the following day, a group numbering about 200 gathered near Law Yat Plaza to protest what they claimed was 'biased investigations' by the police (Aizat, 2015). Mohd Ali Baharom, popularly known as Ali Tinju, who is a member of the Malaysian Armed Forces Veterans Association and a branch leader of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), was found giving racially sensitive speech during the protest. He told the protesters that 'We want justice. This is the dignity of Malays, not because one Chinese boy attacked many Malays. This is Malay land. Unite, and attack the Democratic Action Party (a predominantly Chinese opposition party) Chinese who are rude' (A social media, 2015).

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At about midnight, a group of men attacked a car driver and two passengers in the car who happened to pass by the area. In addition, several members of the media who were covering the incident were assaulted too Consequently, video of the incident spread like wildfire on the Internet, but the ensuing debates have turned ugly and polarized along racial lines, including that the Low Yat incident was a racial conflict between Malays and Chinese.

Since Independence in 1957, the Malaysian government views interethnic relations as a real challenge to the social stability of the country (Shamsul, 2005). While pleas for national unity appear almost daily in the mass media, interethnic tensions in Malaysia still prevail and tend to surface when issues affecting particular ethnic interests are raised. In addition, the structure of newspapers in Malaysia is strongly influenced by the multi-lingual nature of the nation's population and portrays its pluralistic nature. Newspapers are published in different languages to cater for the respective major ethnic groups. Samad (1991) observed that newspapers in Malaysia play a very important role in the respective ethnic community. The vernacular newspapers focus on events important to the members of their ethnic group. In addition, they also undertake different approaches to problems because different ethnic groups in Malaysia are often times perceived to largely fall within differing bands of living standards and economic status. Muthalib and Wong (2002) asserted that readers of the newspapers learn about issues of significance to their community, and how much importance to attach to the issues, based on the amount of coverage given to them. Scholars also found that in Malaysia, the vernacular newspapers play a central role in shaping political and social reality because the editors and journalists are usually members of the community elite (Lent, 1990). In addition, Brown (2005) found that the Chinese-language newspapers in Malaysia are relatively more independent when compared to their English- and Malay-language counterparts. This is because most of the Chinese press is owned by a business and media tycoon Tiong Hiew King, while the English and Malay newspapers are owned by the *Barisan Nasional* (BN) or the National Front, which is the ruling coalition in Malaysia. Consisting of 13 component parties, the BN is also the largest party in the Parliament of Malaysia.

Significantly, online journalism has been much celebrated in Malaysia by those who craved for alternative perspectives (Wilson, Hamzah, & Khattab, 2003). Among the various independent news sites, scholars regarded *Malaysiakini* as the most interesting and successful one (Brown, 2005; Steele, 2009). *Malaysiakini* has won warm praise from around the world as well as a number of international awards for journalism (Steele, 2009).

In 1997, Malaysia announced a no-censorship guarantee for the Internet, which is known as the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) Malaysia Bill of Guarantees. The then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad was trying to attract investors to the proposed MSC, which would serve as the nation's bridge from the Industrial to the Information Age. In 1999, *Malaysiakini* was set up as Malaysia's first commercial Internet newspaper. It is interesting to note that despite his long-standing aversion to *Malaysiakini*, Mahathir turned to *Malaysiakini* to publish his opinions and concerns in May 2006, contributing critiques of his successor Abdullah Badawi's actions and policies. Tong (2004) found that it was ironic that Mahathir complained that the mainstream media have unfairly denied him space to express his views and accused Abdullah's administration of obstructing press freedom.

The Editor-in-Chief of *Malaysiakini*, Gan (2002) also stated that a growing number of Malaysians have developed a keen interest in democracy, human rights, good governance and independence of the judiciary. Furthermore, the loss of credibility among the traditional media has caused readers to search for alternative sources of news in the Internet. Tang (2009) asserted that the Internet became the first medium that Malaysian citizens are allowed to use for mass communication without first having to secure a government license. Increasingly easy access to e-mail and the global World Wide Web allows politically disenfranchised groups to communicate with like-minded or sympathetic audiences. The opposition groups also have been able to have a voice on the Internet. In addition, Gan (2002) commented that there are courageous journalists who are willing to draw a line in the sand and tell the Government: 'This far, no further' (p. 65).

Objectives and research questions

Media are the principal forums in which potential social problems are identified, defined and articulated. Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien (1980) argued that newspapers are rarely likely to initiate a conflict but they will accelerate and publicize it to a wider audience. Media will also define, albeit within power and structural limitations, the issues, strategies, actions and positions of groups involved in the conflict. Therefore, this study aimed to examine the framing of Low Yat incident by Malaysian mainstream Malay-, English- and Chinese-language as well as alternative newspapers.

The following research questions were examined for the purpose of this study:

RQ1: How extensively was the Low Yat incident covered by the newspapers?

RQ2: What were the news sources used by the newspapers in their coverage of the Low Yat incident?

RQ3: What were the news frames reported by the newspapers in their coverage of the Low Yat incident?

RQ4: What was the valence of the articles published by the newspapers in their coverage of the Low Yat incident?

Theoretical framework

Tuchman and Gitlin were two of the earliest scholars to introduce framing to media studies in 1978 and 1980, respectively. They used the concept of framing as a tool to understand news as a social construction and social resource. Framing differs significantly from the repetition- and accessibility-based models in agenda setting and priming (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). According to Entman (1993), framing is

> to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (Entman, 1993, p. 52)

The literature to date has identified a handful of frames that occur commonly in the news (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993). A study by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) identified five news frames (attribution of responsibility, conflict, human interest,

economic consequences and morality) that were common in the Dutch national news media coverage of the Amsterdam meetings of European heads of state in 1997. It was found that the use of news frames depended on both the type of outlet and the type of topic. Most significant differences were not between media (television vs. the press) but between sensationalist vs. serious types of news outlets. Sober and serious newspapers and television news programs more often used the responsibility and conflict frames, whereas sensationalist outlets more often used the human interest frame. The five generic news frames constructed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) have been widely used in the framing analysis of a range of issues, including racial-ethnic issues, integration, immigration, drugs or crime (Matthes & Kohring, 2008).

Tankard (2008) enumerated several news features that commonly convey frames. They are headlines and kickers, subheads, photographs, photo captions, leads, etc. Wong (2004) outlined four major dimensions of framing that could be studied: (1) presentation of news items (their size and placement); (2) news topic items (or what issues are included in the frame); (3) cognitive attributes (or the specific details of issues included); and (4) affective attributes (valence or tone of the article/picture). Manheim (1994) also explained that valence is the tone of a news story or comment regarding certain frames. It is believed to have the potential to generate behavioral effects. By indicating discourse valuations or carrying positive and/or negative elements, valenced news frames present the extent to which the coverage reflects favorably or unfavorably on the event/issue. In addition, Weaver (2007) mentioned that frame can be studied by means of systematic content analysis, interpretive textual analysis or discourse analysis. Tankard (2008) remarked that framing give quantitative researchers a way to approach ideology, a subject mostly dealt with by critical theorists to date. Framing may even give quantitative researchers a means to examine the hypothesis of media hegemony, one that has been difficult to validate empirically.

News is socially constructed. As such, it is shaped not just by what happens but also the social and institutional context of news production and presentation (Spratt et al., 2007). A wide range of factors may influence which events are covered (or not) and in what way: there are legal, economic and political forces, cultural considerations (including race) and the organizational structure of the media as well as journalists' own work routines (Gan, Teo, & Detenber, 2005). When it comes to ideologically sensitive issues, Song (2007) found that the mainstream news media serve as an institution of social control by imposing frames that marginalize causes or movements that challenge the values of the mainstream society. Alternative media, on the other hand, often serve as a communication outlet for movements and causes that are ignored or marginalized by the mainstream media. As mentioned earlier, the newspapers in Malaysia have different approaches as well as political affiliation. Therefore, building upon previous literature, the current study examines the framing of Law Yat incident from four different dimensions: (1) intensity of coverage, (2) news sources, (3) news frames; and (4) valence of the articles.

Method

The selected newspapers

The mainstream daily newspapers chosen for this study were *Harian Metro* (*Bahasa Malaysia*), *The Star* (English) and *Sin Chew Daily* (Chinese). These three dailies also

have their online counterparts but the online content is almost identical to the printed version. According to the Audit Bureau of Circulations Malaysia, the 2015 average daily circulation of *Harian Metro, The Star* and *Sin Chew Daily* were 217,384; 272,507 and 352,761, respectively (www.abcm.org.my). *Malaysiakini* has also gone on to record average daily hits of approximately 200,000, which compares respectably with the circulation of mainstream newspapers (Brown, 2002).

Harian Metro enjoys the highest circulation in the Malay-language stream. It is owned by Media Prima, which is an investment arm of the ruling party UMNO. Media Prima is a media conglomerate that owns various media companies. It holds the controlling shares of newspapers like *New Straits Times*, *Business Times*, *Malay Mail*, *Berita Harian* and *Shin Min Daily News*. It also has majority equity interests in television stations like TV3, NTV7, 8TV and TV9, while owning three radio stations – Fly FM, Hot FM and One FM.

The Star enjoys the highest circulation in the English-language stream. The Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), one of the component parties of BN, is a major shareholder of *The Star*. The English newspapers in Malaysia are usually read by the elites and English-educated readers, who are mostly concentrated in the urban areas. Lent (1990) stated that it is only the readership of English newspapers that could transcends racial groupings in Malaysia. Hence, the author claimed that the English press also serves as an interethnic medium.

Sin Chew also enjoys the highest circulation in the Chinese-language stream. It is owned by a business and media tycoon, Tiong Hiew King. *Sin Chew* is circulated throughout Malaysia and neighboring countries, in southern Thailand, Brunei, Indonesia and northern Kalimantan. It is also published and printed in Indonesia and Cambodia under separate mastheads. It is noteworthy that *Sin Chew* offers extensive coverage on politics, economy, culture and education, while being considered as the most outspoken mainstream newspapers in Malaysia (Ou, 2009; Yang & Md Sidin, 2015).

Malaysiakini is said to often set the agenda for other news media (Steele, 2009). Although *Malaysiakini* offers sections in English, Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese and Tamil, this study only focused on the English section because other sections contain mainly translations of major English-language stories.

Sampling and coding procedures

This study used a purposive sample, which contained the peak period of the Law Yat incident. The sample was drawn from July 11–31, 2015. The articles were collected via database search, which were pulled from the respective newspaper's online service by using 'Low Yat' as the keyword. The unit of analysis was the article, which included straight news, columns and letters.

The intensity of coverage refers to the importance of news stories (De Vreese, Banducci, Semetko, & Boomgaarden, 2006). It was studied from two angles: (1) number of news items, and (2) type of news items. In addition, this study employed the inductive or emergent coding approach, whereby the researcher outlined the coding categories after a preliminary examination of the data. The categories for news sources used in this study were: (1) Royal Police Malaysia (PDRM); (2) National Front (BN) leaders; (3) Opposition leaders; (4) Low Yat workers or management; (5) Civilians; (6) Chinese NGOs; and (7) Others.

Six categories of news frames were identified in this study: (1) Police and courts; (2) Low Yat episode; (3) Criticism; (4) Responsibility; (5) Moral; and (6) Others. The following are the operational definitions for the news frames:

1. Police and courts – reports police investigations and arrests; reports charges pressed by the police; covers court hearings of those involved in the incident.
2. Low Yat episode – presents the 5Ws and 1H information about the melee in Low Yat Plaza and protest near the mall; reports the chronology or evolution of the incident.
3. Criticism – condemns those who were involved in the incident; criticizes the irresponsible bloggers, social media users or politicians; criticizes police actions.
4. Responsibility – attributes responsibility or solution to either the government or police; calls for bloggers or social media users to be responsible.
5. Moral – puts the events, issues or problems in the context of moral prescriptions or religious tenets; emphasizes on understanding, tolerance and fellowship; calls for calm and clear minds to prevent racial disharmony.
6. Others – any other frames that do not fit into the abovementioned categories.

Valence/tone of the articles refers to the attitude expressed towards any individual, group, party or institution by its user (Baumgartner & Wirth, 2012). This study used the categories of supportive, negative and neutral for the analysis of attitude expressed towards the people involved in the Low Yat incident.

Data analysis and inter-coder reliability

The 291 articles collected from the four newspapers were analyzed by the first author using descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentage. To ensure the reliability of this study, a communication graduate was chosen as the second coder. During the training session, the first author (who was also the first coder) and the second coder coded 50 articles that were chosen randomly from the sample of this study. Disagreements were analyzed and some additional explanations were included to the coding instruction in the code book.

The inter-coder reliability for this study was established by randomly selecting 10% of the news items, which was equivalent to 29 articles. Using Holsti's formula (cited in Wimmer & Dominick, 2006), it was found that the inter-coder reliability for intensity of coverage and news sources was 1.0; while news frames was 0.95 and for valence, 0.99.

Findings

The following are some basic information regarding the frequency and percentage of the variables suggesting the importance of conceptual differentiation between the four newspapers.

Intensity of coverage

Sin Chew contributed the most number of news items (131 articles), followed by *The Star* (99 articles), *Malaysiakini* (43 articles) and *Harian Metro* (18 articles). As indicated in

Table 1, majority of the articles were straight news. In fact, *Harian Metro* only published straight news in its coverage of the Law Yat incident. A finding of interest was that *Sin Chew* published an article in the form of reporter's note, in which the crime reporter who was attacked during the mob violence near Low Yat Plaza presented his personal experience of the nightmare.

News sources

Table 2 shows that the PDRM was used as the most dominant news source by *Harian Metro* (66.70%), *The Star* (28.78%) and *Malaysiakini* (36.73%). In addition, *Sin Chew* relied mostly on BN leaders as its news source (25.98%).

News frames

Table 3 exhibits that *Harian Metro*, *The Star* and *Malaysiakini* employed 'police and courts' as the most dominant frame in their coverage of the Law Yat incident, while *Sin Chew* adopted 'Low Yat episode' as its most salient frame.

Harian Metro
Through adopting the 'police and courts' frame (73.68%), *Harian Metro* reported that the police arrested a 22-year-old man, while hunting the remaining six men who smashed up RM70,000 worth of electronics (Sarah, 2015). Subsequently, it reported that a total of 18 people aged between 16–40 have been arrested over two days in connection with the theft and riots near Low Yat Plaza (Aizat, 2015). *Harian Metro* also reported that the Inspector-General of Police (IGP) Khalid Abu Bakar said among those suspected of spreading malicious reports about the Low Yat incident was blogger Papagomo. The IGP also warned that it was better for Papagomo and the others to surrender rather than be arrested (Omar, 2015). Furthermore, four handphone

Table 1. Types of news items for the Low Yat incident

	Harian Metro (n = 18) %	The Star (n = 99) %	Sin Chew (n = 131) %	Malaysiakini (n = 43) %
Straight news	100	92.93	95.42	90.70
Columns	0	3.03	3.82	9.30
Letters	0	4.04	0	0
Reporter's note	0	0	0.76	0

Table 2. News sources for the Low Yat incident

	Harian Metro (n = 18) %	The Star (n = 99) %	Sin Chew (n = 131) %	Malaysiakini (n = 43) %
PDRM	66.70	28.78	20.34	36.73
BN leaders	6.67	26.62	25.98	12.24
Opposition leaders	0	3.60	11.30	14.29
Low Yat workers/ management	6.67	8.63	13.56	18.37
Civilians	6.67	20.14	11.86	6.12
Chinese NGOs	0	0.72	5.65	0
Others	13.33	11.51	11.30	12.24

Table 3. News frames for the Low Yat incident

	Harian Metro (n = 18) %	The Star (n = 99) %	Sin Chew (n = 131) %	Malaysiakini (n = 43) %
Police and courts	73.68	29.03	20.00	42.55
Low Yat episode	21.05	19.35	22.14	21.28
Criticism	0	20.16	17.86	12.77
Responsibility	0	18.55	19.29	14.90
Moral	0	11.29	15.71	6.39
Others	5.26	1.61	5.00	2.13

retailers aged between 19 and 29 were arrested by the police to assist investigations (Junaidi, 2015).

By employing the 'Low Yat episode' frame (21.05%), *Harian Metro* reported that the owner of a handphone shop, See Ming Ho, 28, claimed that he and three other shop attendants were attacked because they captured the 22-year-old man for shoplifting. See also mentioned that when he turned away to get a free gift, the man was gone with the unpaid Lenovo smartphone. See then got help from shop attendants in other shop to apprehend the man before handing him over to the police (Muhammad Hafis, 2015). *Harian Metro* also reported that the Malaysian Muslim Consumers' Association (PPIM) claimed that a few other popular shopping malls in Kuala Lumpur were found to be selling fake handphones (Mohd Rizal, 2015).

The Star

The Star devoted 29.03% of its coverage to the 'police and courts' frame. It was reported that Shahrul Anuar Abdul Aziz, who was accused of stealing a Lenovo S860 smartphone, valued at RM800, pleaded not guilty to the charged of theft at a magistrate's court (Yunus, 2015). Furthermore, *The Star* reported that the IGP said police would go for two individuals alleged to have caused racial tension in connection with the brawl in Low Yat Plaza. One of them was Ali Tinju, who is a political party branch leader. He was seen on video making offensive racial remarks. The video had gone viral and was even posted on the politician's Facebook page. The other was blogger Papagomo, who posted a picture purportedly of a 'victim' of the ruckus, further worsening the situation (Farik, 2015). *The Star* also reported that the IGP swore to arrest many more, especially those who abused the social media. He was quoted as saying 'We will not compromise; I don't care what's your race. You try to fan racial tensions we will take stern action' (Loh, 2015). Consequently, Bagan UMNO division head Shaik Hussein Mydin was arrested for posting messages criticizing the IGP in a Telegram messaging group (Murad, 2015a).

The second salient frame found in *The Star* was 'criticism' (20.16%). MCA religious harmony bureau chairman Ti Lian Ker slammed that stealing is a criminal offence and no quarters should even conceive stoking racial fire. He added that there was no place for vigilantism in Malaysia, especially when it involved physical assault and violence. Ti also hit out at random attacks against members of the media (Tan, 2015). In addition, Noor Farida Ariffin, who is a coordinator for G25 and a former Malaysian ambassador to the Netherlands, stated that those who were involved in the brawl on both sides should be condemned and they should apologize to the larger Malaysian community for the wrongs done. She also criticized that a mob incident during Ramadhan clearly showed that those involved do not uphold the sanctity of the holy month (Murad,

2015b). It is noteworthy that G25 is an NGO originally consisting 25 eminent Malays, it now has 53 members and many supporters among other prominent figures. The members of G25 share a common value that, while recognizing Malaysia is a predominantly Muslim country with Islam as the official religion, they believe that its administration should be in line with the constitutional provisions regarding the role of Islam guaranteeing all citizens their fundamental rights to freedom of expression and worship. G25 aspires to act as the voice of moderation on religion, while advocating for change to strengthen the institutions of law and order and improve the standards of governance in the administration of the country.

By focusing on the 'Low Yat episode' frame (19.35%), *The Star* reported that the protest near Low Yat Plaza was led by a Malay-Muslim group called *Pertubuhan Kebajikan dan Dakwah Islamiah Se-Malaysia* (Pekida). It was also reported that the police had to apprehend a man who carried a wooden stick, believed to be working in Low Yat Plaza, from charging towards the protest group (Murad & Joibi, 2015). In addition, tourists were surprised to find that many shops and kiosks in Low Yat Plaza were closed after the riot (Hanis, 2015).

Sin Chew

This study found that the most salient frame in *Sin Chew* was 'Low Yat episode' (22.14%). While reporting the evolution and development of the relevant incidents, as mentioned earlier, *Sin Chew* published an article in the form of reporter's note, in which the crime reporter Chan Woei Loon, who was beaten up while covering the protest near Low Yat Plaza has shared another side to the ugly incident. Chan said he and a photographer were assigned to cover the protest as they were on the night shift. He said being a crime reporter for five years and having covered similar protest, he had expected to come out of the incident unharmed. As he was submitting a story at a nearby mamak stall around midnight, a fight broke out and he saw *China Press* photographer Sam Kar Haur being chased and beaten up by a group of 20–30 people. Sam tried to escape but he was pushed and fell near the mamak stall as the group kept assaulting him. Chan then ran to Sam's rescue but he was also punched and hit with helmet. At the time, a few Malay men pushed away those who tried to beat them and saved Sam, while Chan backed away and ran to a small valley. When he reached where the policemen were, the assailants stopped hitting him (Chai, 2015).

In addition, *Sin Chew* also reported that a victim of the riot near Low Yat Plaza disputed a claim that he provoked the mob which left him and two friends injured and his car smashed. Freelance salesman Patrick Lim, 21, said he had never shouted at the mob that the Malays were useless or made any racial remarks during the incident. Lim recalled that he drove pass Berjaya Times Square when he saw a crowd. There was no central locking in his car, and hence some of the rioters opened his door and asked if he was Chinese. Lim did not answer as his mind was blank and next he was punched straight away. He and his friends were attacked with wood planks, motorcycle locks, hammers and helmet. The mob broke his car windows and jumped up and down on it. Lim's handphone and wallet were taken away when they were attacked. The whole incident lasted for about 10 minutes until the police arrived (Victim did not, 2015).

In its 'responsibility' frame (19.29%), a columnist of *Sin Chew* highlighted that there was a need for the police to investigate who was the mastermind ruling over 200 people

to have the courage to gather over some race-fired sentiment near Low Yat Plaza in a short time. The columnist also urged the opposition lawmakers to stop their opportunity-chasing politics of war trying to make the Law Yat breakout sound like a race rage (Who is the mastermind, 2015).

In addition, *Sin Chew* devoted 17.86% of its coverage to the 'criticism' frame. *Sin Chew* reported that the handphone traders in Law Yat Plaza complained that it was inappropriate for the police to take away almost 40 male shop attendants without warrant. The shop attendants were brought from the mall to police station to assist investigation. It was argued that the police could have talked to them in the mall, or requested for the CCTV recording of the brawl from the mall security department (Almost 40 workers, 2015). Furthermore, a *Sin Chew* columnist criticized that a Malay newspaper column wrote an inflammable piece calling for an economic jihad against the Chinese race because of their dominance in business. It was condemned that such brainwashing message has been made over and over again, which grows in the telling: Chinese is out to cheat and rob and take over the country. The columnist also warned that the situation could only get worse if the Malays are being constantly told in various ways that the non-Malays are the enemy (Find ways, 2015).

On a different note, *Sin Chew* devoted 15.71% of its coverage adopting the 'moral' frame. The crime reported who was beaten up, Chan remarked that what has happened had nothing to do with race as proven by the Malay policemen who had saved him from being beaten up. There were also Malay reporters who tried to help, while some Malay members of the Civil Defense Department (JPAM) rushed him to the hospital. Chan added that the doctor who treated him was also Malay. Chan also said he was glad that he did the right thing and bore no grudges against the assailants. He said the group was mostly youth and did not appear to know what they were doing (MCMC to probe, 2015).

Malaysiakini

'Police and court' (42.55%) was found to be the most salient frame in *Malaysiakini*. The IGP admitted that the accomplice of the youth who stole a smartphone at Low Yat Plaza was released by the police officer-in-charge without referring to his superior first. The IGP also confirmed that the officer would be dealt with by the police separately (Alhadjri, 2015).

In its 'Low Yat episode' frame (21.28%), *Malaysiakini* published a timeline of the incident by compiling information from witnesses, police reports, charge sheets and the account of *Malaysiakini* reporters (Lu, 2015). It was also reported that the Malay-Muslim group Pekida claimed that they had never issued any official orders for its members to gather at Law Yat Plaza to protest (Tong, 2015).

By focusing on the 'criticism' frame (12.77%), *Malaysiakini* reported that Rafizi Ramli, who is the vice-president of the People's Justice Party (PKR) blamed UMNO for encouraging race motivated groups like Perkasa and Isma to openly campaign on extreme race and religious platforms. Rafizi said the concern that politics post-2008 has been too racialized with race dimension adopted as the main narrative to explain UMNO's weakening position has finally come one full circle. He added that the effect of using race politics as the main ammunition against the opposition has finally manifested itself in the form of

the fragile race relations in Malaysia – so much so that a simple theft incident can turn into a national race issue (Thayaparan, 2015).

Valence

Table 4 shows that *Sin Chew* (89.31%) was most critical towards the Low Yat brawl, followed by *Malaysiakini* (88.37%), *The Star* (83.84%) and *Harian Metro* (72.22%).

Discussion

The differences in the number of articles published by the four newspapers indicated that they carried unequal weight of attention to the Low Yat incident. It was obvious that *Sin Chew* was most concerned about the incident. The data also demonstrated that there was a wide gap between the numbers of article published by the four newspapers. *Sin Chew* had 131 articles, while the least number were published by *Harian Metro* with only 18 articles, and this led to the difference of 113 articles between the two. Media bring to the audience issues for them to think about. Tankard (2008) recognized that much of the power of framing comes from its ability to define the terms of a debate without the audience realizing that it is taking place. Media framing can be likened to the magician's sleight of hand attention is directed to one point so that people do not notice the manipulation that is going on at another point. The finding that there was a great difference in the number of articles published by *Harian Metro* and the other three dailies reflected that the Malay-language newspaper has downplayed the Law Yat incident. The reason was not because the issue was not newsworthy, but might be due to some gatekeeping process.

Another finding of interest was that all the four newspapers published most of their coverage in the form of straight news instead of opinion pieces, which are able to provide a ready-made public forum for readers to share information. Readers depend very heavily on the type of materials made available through the newspapers together with the relative prominence given to the different types of material and the way they are handled in order to evaluate an issue. Straight news articles give facts or quote references on general information like who, what, when, where, why and how. Palvik and McIntosh (2004) called this the surveillance function of journalism. On the other hand, editorials are opinion pieces that often identify, define, articulate and address current events or public controversies. Palvik and McIntosh (2004) called this type of journalism function correlation. While editorials reflect the newspaper's official stance on issues, columns are written by members of the editorial staff and typically reflect a more personal point of view than the editorials. Van Dijk (cited in Rinnawi, 2007) remarked that when straight news dominated the coverage, it left little room for the creativeness of journalists, resulting in a top-down communication format.

Table 4. Valence for the Low Yat incident

	Harian Metro (n = 18) %	The Star (n = 99) %	Sin Chew (n = 131) %	Malaysiakini (n = 43) %
Supportive	0	0	0.76	0
Critical	72.22	83.84	89.31	88.37
Neutral	27.78	16.16	9.92	11.63

Loo and Mustafa (2010) asserted that the existence of conflict is an inevitable part of human interaction. Therefore the question should not be on how to prevent it but rather how to deal with it in such a way as to produce the best possible and least violent outcomes for all the parties concerned. The authors called for newspapers to provide a fair, balanced and neutral coverage of the interethnic conflicts. They also stated that newspapers should provide more in-depth analyses and discussions rather than merely focusing on the straightforward reporting of the facts. This will provide the public with access to balanced and comprehensive information and ensure better understanding of the issues. It will also help the public to discuss the interethnic issues in a constructive manner.

Entman (1993) argued that to some extent, source is the story. Similarly, Dolan (2005) also noted that the use of sources is an extremely important part of both the story's construction and also its orientation and, ultimately, the point of view being supported in a given story. This study found that there was a consistency across the newspapers to use police as the major news source. This showed that the newspapers allowed the police to act as opinion leader in defining the Low Yat incident. Scholars (Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Scheufele, 2000; Tankard, 2008) also recognized that news sources are 'frame sponsor' for an article. Therefore, it is not surprising that the 'police and courts' as well as 'Law Yat episode' appeared to be the two most salient frames found in all the four newspapers. While informing their readers about the chronology, evolution or development of the Law Yat incident, the newspapers also portray that the situation was under control by highlighting police investigations and arrests as well as court charges. In addition, it was reflected that violence and extremism were unacceptable in the country.

It is noteworthy that *Sin Chew* was the only newspaper in this study to report voices that criticized the police. Speaking of the Sword of Damocles, Group Editor-in-Chief of *Sin Chew*, N.C. Siew (cited in Ou, 2009) said, 'There are five swords, not just one, hanging above the heads of all media workers in this country.' The five swords refer to the five specific legislations that restrict press freedom in Malaysia – the *Publications and Printing Presses Act, Internal Security Act, Sedition Act, Official Secrets Act* and *Defamation Act*. In a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society, *Sin Chew* has to tread a fine line in its reportage, balancing views from all perspectives, as well as having to operate within the extremely tight regulatory restrictions relating to publications (Ou, 2009).

This study found that *Malaysiakini* often looked at the Low Yat incident from a big picture point of view, such as, identifying what a particular story had to do with the larger political picture and its implications in a multiracial society. With regard to the role of alternative media in Malaysia, Smeltzer (2008) recognized that the foremost goal is to directly and explicitly challenge the authority of elites in setting the national agenda and in forging consensus. Studies on alternative media also showed that they often provide a space for the rational-critical discourse, which is crucial to the creation of a public sphere (Atton, 2003, 2009; Harcup, 2003).

It is of significant concern that *The Star*, *Sin Chew* and *Malaysiakini* reported that the Law Yat incident has been highly racialized by irresponsible bloggers, social media users and politicians in the country. This finding resonated with the opinion expressed by various scholars that race and ethnicity issues remain highly politicized in Malaysia

while the country's beautiful diversity had become an easy prey for many politicians to inflame divisive sentiments for personal interest (Abbott & Franks, 2007; Kahn, 2005; Maznah, 2009; Ooi, 2006; Shamsul, 2005).

Commenting on the Law Yat incident, French sociologist Sophie Lemiere argued that the riot was the product of a political system that divides the nation along adversarial ethnic lines. Dubbed 'politok' – a portmanteau of politics and amok – Lemiere wrote that the system is one that engenders the prejudicial view of 'us versus them', which she said is a staple of majoritarian ethno-nationalist organizations and ethno-centric political parties. It was addressed that the Malaysian politics continues to be dominated by race-based parties, whereby each professes to champion their own communities' interests (Low Yat incident, 2015).

Lemiere also recognized that further fueling the resentment along ethnic lines is the continued message of inequality between the largely-Malay *bumiputera* (*son of the soil*) majority with the other races that are often portrayed as wealthy and comfortable. This is compounded by repeated claims of the non-*bumiputera* communities' obligation to the natives stemming from the time they were granted citizenship when what was then Malaya gained independence from the British. In addition, Lemiere also argued that the myth of resistance and prejudice has nurtured many young Malaysian Malays. It begins with the teaching of a distorted version of Malaysian history systematically erasing a large part of the country's multi-ethnic heritage and instilling political propaganda (Low Yat incident, 2015).

In her book titled *Concepts of Conflict, War and Peace in the Malay Language*, Asmah (2003) discussed that an amok situation usually results in injury and bloodshed caused by the amok participant on people around them who are taken unawares. However, she highlighted that the actual target is usually a personality or personalities between whom and the amok participant there exists a big social gap.

> As such, the amok participant feels that accessibility to the person is next to impossible, and even if he manages to be in a face-to-face situation with this personality he may not be able to get the attention of the superior person concerned. So the only way for him to release his frustration is by running amok. In this way, attention will be drawn to him and his problem. (Asmah, 2003, p. 6)

In his study of communicating amok in Malaysia, Williamson (2007) documented that incidents of running amok have been a dramatic part of life on the Malay Peninsula for 150 years, for as long as there has been a mass media to publicize violent events and a rationalized bureaucracy interested in regulating them. He also argued that in Malaysia, references to amok provide an index of social pain that people feel but have difficulty communicating to others. This includes the pain of economic transformation, family dislocation and ethnic competition. Williamson (2007) singled out the May 13 incident as a typical example of mass amok. He also found that the phenomena of amok left the ruling coalition with a powerful warning to the opposition – challenge us, and amok will be the result. In addition, he argued that the state was able to limit discussion to its own diagnosis and remedy for the May 13 problem by labeling the urban rebellion as insane violence. Referring to a more recent example, Williamson (2007) recorded that in 2006, Minister in the Prime Minister Department Nazri Aziz warned the public that although Muslims in Malaysia were tolerant people, 'you must remember that the word

amok comes from this country and there is a limit to everything.' Therefore, Williamson (2007) argued that political possibilities in Malaysia continue to hinge on the productive capacities of amok violence. He asserted that it was semantics for the politicians to highlight the potential of amok and it was vital to study how violent processes were embedded in political communication.

Conclusion

Framing analysis allows researchers to examine the roles of media in the development of social and political issues. This study examined what aspects newspapers have created for citizens' understanding of the Low Yat incident. The findings indicated that the newspapers reported the Law Yat incident with different intensity and prominence, while employing police as the major news source. The newspapers informed their readers about the chronology, evolution or development of the Law Yat incident, while portraying that the situation as under control. In addition, it was reflected that violence and extremism were unacceptable in Malaysia. It was also found that the Law Yat incident has been highly racialized by irresponsible bloggers, social media users and politicians in the country. This finding resonated with the opinion expressed by various scholars that race and ethnicity issues remain highly politicized in Malaysia. Last but not least, in order to investigate the impact of news frames on people's perception of an issue, it would be interesting to juxtapose the findings of this study with public opinion data to measure public perceptions towards the Law Yat incident as well as race relations.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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